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HYPERALLERGIC

Tripping Through Digital Landscapes in Virtual Reality and on Canvas

by Jeffrey Grunthaner on November 11, 2015



Installation view, Rachel Rossin, 'Lossy' at Zieher Smith & Horton

The works in [Rachel Rossin's](#) show at [Zieher Smith & Horton](#) unfold sequentially, like the illustrations of an idea that is carefully trying to prove itself. The exhibition's theme is loss, or, per the show's title, *Lossy*, a term describing the loss of visual detail that results from data compression.



Rachel Rossin, "5_Bulls" (2015)

oil on canvas, 68 x 37 inches

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Rossin has created a kind of alternate reality out of the entropy to which information is exposed. Her collage-like painting "5_Bulls" (2015), for instance, depicts a copied-and-pasted utopia of pixilated figures that seem drawn from comic books. And her homage to the more contemplative aspects of *Grand Theft Auto*, "After GTA V" (2015), bears witness to a kind of scrap paper digitality, capturing the immateriality of images in a pictorial webbing reminiscent of the more tangible and print-based technique of collage. Combining the integrative culture of the digital and the more analytic culture

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of print, “After GTA V” liquefies the compartmentalization of contemporary life. It depicts, in glowing twilight hues, the incompleteness of a world where interactive media totally eclipse lived experience.

The Impressionistic brushwork of “GTA V” gives it a gestural presence, evoking the hand-guided movements of game play in a painterly, expressive manner that approaches pictorial realism. Here, however, realism doesn’t relate to anything the eye sees IRL, but to that which we can only see in a mediated way, through a digital scrim. In this respect, “GTA V” encapsulates the methodology Rossin has applied throughout the show. Everywhere in *Lossy*, immaterial images are rendered as plausible realities.



Rachel Rossin, “After GTA V” (2015), oil on canvas, 60 x 78 inches

Perhaps because they’re oil-on-canvas recreations of digital originals, Rossin’s paintings are much softer, even less elegant, than they might appear as images. Her paintings tend to portray glitch-like figures in settings that combine the utopian spatial possibilities of 3D modeling with allusions to the image saturation of social media. Transferring to the canvas

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figures that she first renders digitally, it's as though Rossin has run the visual language of landscape painting and architectural interiors through Google Translate, reconfiguring the resulting poetic babble according to the terms of traditional realist painting.

The wholesale substitution of images for realities forms an especially vital aspect of the exhibition's virtual reality installation, "I Came And Went As A Ghost Hand" (2015). The work, which reminded me of both Gaspar Noé's *Enter the Void* and the Sega Saturn game *NiGHTS into Dreams*, is uncanny in the way it denies any visual evidence of the body. Wearing a prototype version of Oculus Rift glasses, you're thrown headlong into the polygonal surfaces of walls, or made to float spectrally over some domestic scene reproduced in granular yet amazingly lifelike detail. This hyper-visual work deprives you of any directional control. For the most part, you float; and while you're able to look at and around objects — as you would in any three-dimensional environment — you're shunted in a disembodied, ghost-like manner through the virtually constructed world, as though tethered to a bungee cord pulling you this way and that.



Still from Rachel Rossin, "I Came And Went As A Ghost Hand" (2015), Virtual reality

The objects populating "I Came And Went As A Ghost Hand" are undeniably sculptural; and the bombed-out architectures suspended throughout its snow globe-like expanse are only enhanced by the pixelation they've seemingly undergone in the rendering process. Despite its immersiveness, the virtual reality installation requires a suspension of disbelief; this is what

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enables art to comment on experience, rather than being an enveloping experience unto itself. Ultimately, “I Came And Went As A Ghost Hand” is a formal commentary on the nature of scale, which is usually determined relative to our bodies, but here has been reconfigured as something warped and unsettling.

Rossin’s work is most powerful when she creates novel environments. The pieces in *Lossy* portray expansive spaces replete with weird objects in seemingly impossible juxtapositions. Her paintings continue the search for new structures characteristic of Giorgio de Chirico in his metaphysical period and of Yves Tanguy throughout his entire career. What keeps Rossin’s work from becoming Surrealist, though, is its programmatic authorship. The novelty of structure sought out in these works doesn’t have its origins in the unconscious, but in the spatial logic of 3D rendering, glimpsed through a computer screen. This is what makes her paintings fresh. Rather than mimicking the perspectives of film or photography, Rossin recreates the all-encompassing character of media that incorporate both.



VR installation, Rachel Rossin, 'Lossy' at Zieher Smith & Horton

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Pitting old media against new, measuring their reactivity against one another, the works in *Lossy* seek to bridge the divide between culture and entertainment. Is it so inconceivable that entertaining works can also be intelligent? Today the digital screen takes up the mantle of TV, which for media theorist Marshall McLuhan was a quintessentially “cool” or interactive medium, requiring the presence of a viewer to be fleshed out with content. The works in this exhibition function similarly. Their allure depends on how well they absorb the viewer while still leaving room for refusal and critique.